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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000737

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SUBJECT: Opposition Leader Assures Ambassador He's A Man of Action

Ref: Minsk 731

Classified by DCM Constance Phlipot for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: United Democratic Forces leader Aleksandr Milinkevich and his wife Inna Kulei provided a frank, yet optimistic assessment of the opposition coalition during the Ambassador's July 14 farewell meeting with them. Ambassador stressed that many in the opposition, especially the youth who participated in the election protests, have grown impatient with the opposition leaders' focus on foreign travel and internal leadership disputes. Milinkevich acknowledged these concerns and explained that following the elections it was necessary for him to focus on keeping the coalition together. Milinkevich claimed to have made some progress on this front, and with the recent creation of an executive arm of the UDF, he is committed to implementing "very concrete" initiatives to re-energize the democratic movement. Milinkevich and Kulei also raised a host of other issues, including Kulei's work on providing assistance to victims of political repression, the current assistance needs of the opposition, and Lukashenko's possible plans to name his son Viktor as his successor. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On July 14, Ambassador met with United Democratic Forces leader and former opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and his wife Inna Kulei. A visiting official from USAID Kiev and Pol/Econ Chief also attended the meeting. After presenting Kulei with a photo of her and VP Cheney during the latter's May trip to Vilnius, Ambassador engaged the couple on a wide range of issues.

Milinkevich Acknowledges Problems, Intent To Overcome Them

¶3. (C) Milinkevich said he does not plan to embark on any more foreign trips in the near future, but will focus his energy on building up the coalition and attracting more democratic-minded Belarusians to the movement. Ambassador noted that many of the students and youth who participated in the demonstrations surrounding the March 19 presidential elections are deeply disappointed with the UDF for losing so much momentum amidst internal squabbles and leadership disputes. Milinkevich acknowledged these concerns, but explained that he has been consumed with the equally difficult tasks of keeping the fragile coalition together and attracting the unorganized but active youth. Milinkevich conceded that up until now he has focused most of his attention on the former task, but stressed that he has achieved some success in keeping the UDF together and is now encouraging all UDF members to start working. He hopes that the democratic youth will see the UDF as an organization of action and will renew their interests in

the democratic movement.

14. (C) Kulei, in defense of her husband's work, noted that Milinkevich has not completely neglected the task of attracting new members at the expense of keeping the coalition together. She explained that Milinkevich works closely with the Belarusian Assembly of Democratic Organizations, an umbrella organization of some 230 NGOs, and the Assembly has developed close relations with many new informal youth networks.

Milinkevich Pushes Ahead In Spite Of Leadership Problems

15. (C) Milinkevich noted that the Political Council of the UDF met on July 13 and agreed on a "very concrete" six-month action plan that includes preparing for the January 2007 municipal elections. The Political Council also established a Secretariat, which would serve as the executive arm of the Political Council. After repeated refusals by Kalyakin to accept the position, Milinkevich asked BNF Deputy Viktor Ivashkevich to serve as temporary head of the Secretariat. Milinkevich acknowledged that Kalyakin, Lebedko, and UDF leader Bukhvostov were absent from the meeting for various reasons, but the UDF leader stressed "the UDF must stop planning and start doing." Milinkevich noted he had recently completed a series of trips in the regions and found that UDF headquarters in several oblasts remained intact from the presidential elections, including UCP regional chapters, and would continue to support Milinkevich.

16. (C) Milinkevich hesitated to call the leadership disputes in the coalition "tragic." He did not believe

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Lebedko would split from the UDF, but would likely carry out separate initiatives. On Kalyakin, Milinkevich repeated his earlier assessment that since Kalyakin returned from Moscow in June, he is keen on developing a leftist wing of the UDF. Milinkevich asserted that the vast majority of parties and organizations in the UDF refused to back Kalyakin's initiative, but speculated that Kalyakin would remain in the coalition. Milinkevich added that Kalyakin is increasingly concerned that the GOB will force strip Kalyakin's Communist party of its registration and force it into a union with the pro-government Communist party. (Note: On July 15, the pro-government Communists held a unification conference with "disappointed members" of Kalyakin's party and declared the latter's party will lose its registration. Details reported in septel.)

UDF Efforts to Help Politically Repressed

17. (C) Kulei noted the UDF's Committee for Defense (CDR) of the Repressed continued to make remarkable progress in encouraging foreign governments and local religious organizations to provide various types of assistance to the politically repressed. She noted her organization cuts across partisan and ideological lines and involves activists from all opposition groups and parties. Kulei explained CDR focuses on marshaling assistance for four particularly repressed groups: 1) expelled or harassed students; 2) workers who have been fired; 3) activists beaten by GOB security forces; and 4) families of the repressed. Kulei added that CDR recently launched a media campaign involving letter exchanges between families of repressed activists and families in Western countries. Kulei stressed such a committee was instrumental in bringing down the dictatorial regime in Poland.

Donor Assistance Must Reflect Present Realities

18. (C) Milinkevich encouraged all foreign donors to take

note of two critical developments in Belarus. First, unlike several years ago, the GOB has ensured that the overwhelming majority of opposition activists is unemployed and is often unable to provide for their families. As a result, the established opposition has found it extremely difficult to attract new members. Second, the donor community is allocating a disproportionate amount of resources to holding conferences and seminars for the opposition outside of Belarus than on the realization of pro-democratic activities within Belarus. While expressing appreciation for Western support of the Belarusian democratic forces, Milinkevich said the international community should consider providing opposition leaders more resources to put into practice the knowledge gained at the conferences.

¶9. (C) Milinkevich also informed Ambassador of his recent conversation with two European Parliament MPs about the possible creation of an information center for the UDF under the auspices of the European Parliament. The MPs informed him the European Parliament could make a decision on the project in September. Ambassador added that the U.S. was interested in supporting opposition activist Olga Stuzhenskaya's information center in Brussels. Milinkevich was familiar with these plans and agreed that that Stuzhenskaya's center should represent all of Belarus' democratic forces.

Lukashenko's Possible Plans on Choosing A Successor

¶10. (C) Milinkevich speculated that the possible GOB-imposed unification of Kalyakin's Communist party and the pro-Lukashenko Communist party could serve as a vehicle for Lukashenko's successor. Milinkevich has heard that the Belarusian president eventually plans to install his son Viktor as his successor. The UDF leader provided a (very) rough outline of the possible succession of events: the expanded pro-GOB Communist party picks Viktor as leader of the organization; Lukashenko directs National Assembly deputies to organize themselves into several (subservient) parties and makes the pro-GOB Communist Party the "ruling party;" Viktor runs for Congress in the 2008 Parliamentary elections and his pro-GOB Communist Party wins the most seats; Viktor is elected Speaker of Parliament; and Lukashenko formally transfers most of his governing power to the Parliament Speaker.

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Implications of Kozulin Trial For G8 Summit

¶11. (C) Given that Belarus would likely be raised during G8 discussions, Milinkevich was surprised the regime gave former opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin a harsh sentence of five and one-half years in imprisonment. (Note: Kozulin was convicted of "hooliganism" and disturbing the peace. See reftel for details.) Milinkevich noted that his contacts in the Belarusian security forces assured him Kozulin would not be sentenced to more than two years in prison. The UDF leader commented that the stiff sentence sends a clear message to the G8 leaders and the international community that Lukashenko will not buckle to Western pressures for political reform.

¶12. (C) When asked, Milinkevich told Ambassador the United Democratic Forces (UDF) did not plan to be in St. Petersburg during the upcoming G8 Summit to seek ad hoc meetings with G8 leaders. Milinkevich noted that Russian democratic parties and NGOs intended to convene a conference in St. Petersburg during the G8 Summit and members of the UDF were invited to participate, but for reasons unknown to Milinkevich the conference was called off.

¶13. (C) While admitting that serious problems continue to confront the United Democratic Forces, Milinkevich and Kulei went to great lengths to accentuate the positive. Milinkevich wanted to leave with Ambassador the clear impression that the UDF is forging ahead, with or without opposition leaders Lebedko and Kalyakin. While we have not yet seen the UDF's latest six-month plan of action, Milinkevich claims it achieves what the coalition's earlier two-year and one-year plans have not been able to do thus far Q assign areas of responsibility to particular individuals and organizations. Milinkevich will likely find it difficult to implement his action plan at the national and local level without the strong backing of Lebedko and Kalyakin, but he appears to understand that as long as he preoccupies himself with coalition organizational issues, the prospects for widening the campaign for democratic change remain extremely low.

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